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ABSTRACT

This study examined the types of support, resources, and professional development that teachers considered the most beneficial in implementing curriculum reform. Participants were 185 literacy teachers from urban, suburban, and rural middle schools in a northwestern state. The study used questionnaires to collect information about teachers' knowledge of the reform initiative and their perceived needs for support in realigning their curriculum with new state standards. Part 1 of the questionnaire requested demographic data on the teacher and school. Part 2 discussed participants' level of need for various types of support related to curricular change. Part 3 contained open-ended questions allowing participants to individualize their responses. Focus group interviews helped elaborate and clarify information obtained from the questionnaires. Data analysis noted the importance of providing teachers with adequate time. Teachers identified the need for time to plan, discuss, observe, and share ideas with their colleagues about the craft of teaching. There was a strong desire for school district personnel to play an important support role in convincing the public that teacher professional development time is time and money well spent. Teachers considered money to support this change process an essential resource. Respondents expressed a strong preference for support to come from colleagues and administrators. Teachers wanted additional information about assessment strategies and whole class instructional strategies to expand their professional repertoire. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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Identified Professional Development Needs of Teachers in Curriculum Reform

by

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As various states across the country rise to the challenge of implementing contemporary reform initiatives in the form of new state standards, there is concern and a lack of clarity about the types of teacher support needed to successfully implement these substantial educational initiatives. Darling-Hammond (1997) emphasized the importance of professional development practices that are relevant and connected to the craft of teaching. Therefore, one important ingredient for successful professional development focuses upon helping teachers acquire a repertoire of instructional and assessment strategies that will meet the diverse needs of students as learners. It follows then, that professional development will focus on the characteristics and diverse needs of adult learners as they move toward increased understanding of the complex task of curriculum change.

While knowledge and skills are important content for professional development programs to consider, the review of the literature suggests additional elements of importance. Floden, Goertz, and O'Day (1995) speak of the importance of developing the capacity for teachers to accept and participate in change. Teachers need more than just knowledge and skills, they need encouragement and assistance to develop their dispositions or attitudes toward the goals they have for their students, and to develop the way they view themselves in the classroom (Floden, Goertz, and O'Day, 1995). Professional development needs to provide encouragement and opportunities for teachers to alter the expectations and goals they have for their students. In addition, Guskey and Sparks (1996) emphasized the importance of preparing teachers for the magnitude, the scope, and the practicality of the change process.

Content characteristics of successful professional development to facilitate change include knowledge and skills related to the students, the subject matter and instructional and assessment strategies. Additionally, effective professional development provides content related to understanding the change process and shifting dispositions related to expectations for students as well as teachers' own

roles within the classroom. Professional development designed to assist teachers in moving beyond knowledge and skills, and to develop the capacity for change, will be successful.

The context characteristics of professional development go beyond the content to include, as Guskey and Sparks (1996) described, the organization, system or culture in which the professional development will take place. Context characteristics include circumstances related to professional development such as where and when development would be most successful and, just as valuable, who should be involved and why. Sparks (1994) promotes constructivist professional development that will allow teachers to build their own knowledge structures through collaboration with peers, researchers, and even their students. Darling-Hammond (1997) agreed that if learning is a constructivist process for students, it is equally so for teachers. This constructivist process may include such alternatives as action research within the classroom, observation of others in classrooms, and participation in study groups within the building, district, or even state. Using these adult learning strategies, teachers would have the opportunity to share problems, successes, and new learnings.

Professional development activities must consider the adult learner as an individual and as a member of the organization involved in change. Individuals will have diverse needs and levels of understanding for each new initiative. Professional development for effective educational change must provide a variety of professional development opportunities for teacher involvement in the change process.

Change is a very personal process and teachers are known to be at varying levels of readiness to accept educational change (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1986). Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (1995), stressed the importance of identifying the characteristics and needs of those teachers scheduled to participate in the implementation.

This study was designed to assist school districts in identifying the types of support, resources, and professional development components perceived by teachers to be most beneficial in implementing curriculum reform and consequently for improving student learning.

Methods of Inquiry:

The more information known about the needs and concerns of teachers in the field, the greater the opportunity for the appropriate use of resources for effective professional development and the successful implementation of curricular change.

This study utilized a three-part questionnaire to collect confidential information about teachers' current knowledge of the reform initiative and about their perceived needs for support in realigning their curriculum with the new state standards. Part I of the questionnaire requested general demographic information related to number of years taught, total school enrollment, and individual understanding of issues related to the reform initiative. Part II asked respondents to indicate their level of need for various types of support related to this curricular change. Respondents were asked to use a four point interval scale that offered selections from (1) no need, (2) limited need, (3) moderate need, or (4) great need. Participants were asked to indicate a perceived level of need for 32 items relating to options for uses of time, financial compensation, sources of expressed support, and information for professional growth. Participants were also asked to select the one item of highest priority of need within each of the previously mentioned sections. Part III consisted of three open-ended questions allowing the participants to individualize their responses to information in the previous sections.

Focus group interviews were conducted for elaboration and clarification of information obtained from the questionnaires. Through these interviews, the teachers provided a rich source of additional information related to many of the

questionnaire items. The interview responses allowed the teachers to express, more clearly, their passion for important issues.

Data Analysis:

The sample was composed of 185 literacy teachers from middle schools in 12 districts representing urban, suburban, and rural areas in a northwest state. The survey data were analyzed and reported as descriptive data in eight tables. The demographic data from Part 1 were reported as percentages to show the frequency of certain characteristics. The data from Part 2 were reported using measures of central tendency and standard deviations. Selected item responses were analyzed using a chi-square test to determine whether the observed frequencies differed significantly from the expected frequencies.

The data from the interviews were analyzed and categorized for emerging issues. These data were reported utilizing descriptive language, citing field notes and quotations to substantiate the findings gathered through the questionnaire.

Of particular interest in this study was the identification of possible differentiation in the resources, types of support, and the knowledge base perceived as necessary for curriculum change among teachers with varying levels of teaching experience.

Findings and Conclusions:

The findings describe the resources, types of support, and topics for professional development identified as primary needs by middle level literacy teachers in this study. These findings confirm statements from Darling-Hammond (1993) and Sparks (1994) describing the importance of providing teachers the time needed for various reasons. Teachers identified the need for the resource of time to plan, discuss, observe, and share ideas with their colleagues about the craft of teaching. Further information from Part 3 and the follow-up interviews indicated a

strong desire for school district personnel to play an important support role in convincing the public that teacher professional development time is, in fact, time and money well spent.

It was not surprising that money to support this change process was also found to be an essential resource. Financial compensation for release time and curriculum materials were reported as primary needs by teachers with more than two years of teaching experience. However, teachers newer to the profession would prefer to be compensated for the fees involved in attending workshops and conferences. The teachers with more than two years of teaching experience expressed a need for current curriculum materials that would assist them in creating learning opportunities to better prepare their students in achieving the new literacy standards. These teachers also expressed a desire for financial compensation for release time to work with their colleagues in designing and actualizing the learning opportunities.

Curriculum implementation success is enhanced when teachers receive the support of administrators and colleagues. The respondents expressed a strong preference for support in this change process to come from colleagues, confirming the recommendations of Little (1993), and the Staff Development Standards for the Middle Level (1994). Equally important to these teachers was the desire for support, in many forms, from their building administrators. The teachers felt that administrative support in the form of suggestions and encouragement to try, reflect upon, and revise new teaching strategies related to the curriculum reform would be helpful. A very strong request was expressed by the teachers for support related to student accountability for meeting the predetermined standards before being allowed to advance to the next level.

Study findings describe the elements of a professional knowledge base desired by middle level literacy teachers in this process of curricular change. These findings identify teachers' strong desire for additional information about assessment

strategies and whole class instructional strategies to expand their professional repertoire. Teachers in this study recognize that information regarding assessment strategies should be integrated with instructional strategies for a clearer connection between the learning experiences. The teachers desire more information related to these two components as they realign their curricula with the new state standards.

Educational Importance of Study:

Fullan and Miles (1992) suggested that change is systemic and that efforts are most successful when the district office is closely engaged with the changing school in a collaborative, supportive way. If the change is to take place at the local level, teachers need to be involved in the decisions made regarding the implementation of the new learning requirements. Hall and Hord (1987) proposed that understanding the practices and concerns of those who will be involved in the implementation is the first step for effective change, allowing professional development to be directly related to what teachers perceive to be of greatest need. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (1995) supported this perspective by referring to the importance of offering a wide variety of choices, allowing teachers the opportunity to decide, as a factor for motivating teachers to succeed.

This study is important to the field in that teachers, directly involved with this curricular reform, were invited to share their thoughts and ideas. Clarification of these needs and ideas will strengthen the design of professional development opportunities for effective change.

Possibilities:

Considering all we know about how adults learn, and the issues we confront regarding ownership of professional development, it is critical that we provide adults with a variety of opportunities to reach agreed upon goals (Hirsch, 1998).

Teachers need to participate in training workshops, but they also need to have

opportunities to receive and give help through knowledge-sharing practices. The respondents clearly expressed a need for time to engage in talk and to share information about the craft of teaching. The information gained through the interviews showed that while this collegiality is a need and a desire, it should not be reached at the expense of their own time to plan and prepare. Collaborative professional development supports the shared knowledge and expertise of others in the field, yet there is still a need for individual development and autonomy. This collaboration needs to be made available through a variety of processes. Knowledge-sharing practices can be accomplished through peer coaching with feedback, study groups, action research, and shared teaching situations. Growth experiences outside the building can be met through technology links with others in the field as well as newsletters, partnerships and attendance of regional and national conferences. In a recent study of state-sponsored teacher networks, supported by a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, James Pennell and William Firestone (1998) reported that network programs involved teachers in longer-term and more intensive commitments than the one-shot inservice workshops of the past.

The National Staff Development Council (1995b) has created the following framework of five models for professional development in an effort to acknowledge the diversity of adult learning differences:

(a) individually-guided

(b) inquiry or action research

(c) peer observation/coaching with feedback

(d) training that includes theory, practice, and skills

(e) active involvement in the process of identifying a goal or problem and implementing related intervention.

Professional development will need to include activities that many educators may not even view as professional development. Individuals will have diverse

needs and levels of understanding for each new initiative. Professional development for effective educational change must provide a variety of professional development approaches to meet teachers' needs just as the variety of instructional and assessment strategies in the classroom are designed to meet the needs of individual students.

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